zoomed over the fog, back to her family. She tumbled to the ground, and when she righted herself, Vajra was a powerful spear in her hand.

The Pandavas formed a tight circle. Rudy hissed, slapping the earth with his tail. Brynne whirled her mace. Mini held out her Death Danda. Nikita crouched on the ground, her fingers in the earth. Aiden had his scimitars at the ready.

But no fight came.

Nothing barreled toward them.

A low, dark voice spoke:

"You see what I can do? What I can take from you?"

Aru squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself not to recall Suyodhana's memories. His pain. His *love*.

It's not him anymore, she told herself.

But she hated the part of her that wished it was.

"It's almost impressive how far incompetence can take you these days," said the Sleeper.

"Thanks," said Aru, steeling her voice. "We try."

"And you will fail," said the Sleeper, simply. "You see, children, this war is mine to win. It always has been. If I have to spill your blood, I will not hesitate. But I will give you an option to live a little longer. For I am —"

"Inevitable?" asked Aru.

The Sleeper paused. "What?"

"Please don't tell me you were going to steal your villain line from Thanos."

A different voice, off to the left, asked, "Do we know him—?"

"Quiet," said the Sleeper.

There was a sharp *smack!* followed by a whimper.

Brynne pointed out a shadow to the left and some newly trampled grass. The walls surrounding them groaned, as if being pressed by hundreds of heavy shoulders. Aru's gaze flicked to the tree of paint and the willow tree closest to them, looking for any signs of movement among the branches.

"The truth is I *am* inevitable, Aru Shah," said the Sleeper. "I am war. And I am destiny. Now *give* me the girl."

From behind her sisters, Nikita hollered, "There's *NO* way I'm helping you!"

The air rippled. Sheela appeared, gagged with a shadow and bound with silvery ropes. Her eyes looked frantic, but she held up her chin.

"And what about her?" asked the Sleeper.

Nikita faltered. She looked to Aru and Brynne, torn. Aru set her jaw.

"Use your powers to bring me to the wishing tree, and I will return your sister to you," said the Sleeper. "After all, you cannot win a fight against an army you cannot even see."

Aru's hands balled into fists as she stared at the ground, the Sleeper's words running through her mind. Only one word caught hold: *see*.

The time for the prophecy had run out. Today was Holi. People would be celebrating. Feasting. Throwing colored powders at one another….

Aru's eyes darted to the paint tree on her left. Brilliant colors dripped from its boughs. There was a smudgy quality to it, its bark made with daubs of paint. The branches were slender paintbrushes, and from their bristled ends hung wet fruit of every shade imaginable.

An idea took root.

Aru caught Aiden's attention. He looked at her questioningly, his scimitars still raised in anticipation of a fight. She subtly pointed to the tree of paint, and then to him and Rudy. Their eyes went wide.

Next, Aru tapped into her sisters' minds.

Get ready. We're going to celebrate Holi.

FORTY-SIX

Green Is *Not* Your Color, Trust Me

Aru tightened her grip on Vajra.

The six of them had lined up next to each other. Nikita's lip trembled as she stared at Sheela. Aru squeezed her shoulder, and Nikita looked up at her, her eyes shining, before her eyes searched the grove full of twisting black shadows.

"First…give me my sister," said Nikita. "And then…then I'll help you find the tree."

"Come and get her," said the Sleeper.

His voice seemed to come from everywhere—the ground, the rocks, the trees themselves.

Nikita took one step forward.

To Aru's left, just beyond the weeping willow, there came a low growl that made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. She swung out Vajra….

The shadows twisted anxiously. Invisible hooves dug into the earth. Brynne jumped, smacking the back of her neck as if a bug had landed there. Her mace whipped the air beside her, which made Aiden slash out his scimitars. Rudy reared up on his tail, adjusting his grip on the short dagger Aiden had given him.

"Now, now," said the Sleeper. "None of that. We have a deal, don't we?"

Aru faltered, wanting to grab Nikita and pull her back to safety, but the youngest Pandava stepped outside her grasp.

Nikita squared her shoulders. The crown of flowers around her head glittered like jewels. Her daisy-patterned dress suddenly seemed like a child's Halloween costume, and Aru almost couldn't bring herself to watch as Nikita took one step…then two…then five…until she had reached her twin.

Sheela trembled as the fog writhed around her ankles like chains.

The twins stared at each other wordlessly, and then reached out. They touched fingers for barely an instant before Nikita whirled and dropped to the ground, plunging her fist into the dirt.

"NOW!" she shouted.

The fog twitched beneath Sheela, but Nikita was stronger and faster. A mesh of white thorns knitted itself around both twins, forming a spiked spherical cocoon. A green glow lit it up from the inside as tufts of cotton blossoms poked through, cushioning them. As one, the Pandavas launched fruit from the nearby tree into the air. Brynne swung her mace like a baseball bat, and the produce arced in the air, landing with heavy *splats*.

Colors burst from the fruit and dribbled down invisible forms, exposing various enemies. Not ten feet away, they saw the furred haunch of a rakshasa with the body of a wolf. Brynne blasted him backward with a powerful swing from Gogo. Paint splatter from the impact revealed a row of horns marching toward them. Aru threw Vajra like a javelin, and the demons fell to the ground. A pink pod splashed the face of a naga, and Mini took him out with a sharp twist of her shield. Aru reached for another paint fruit and pitched it forward. It burst in midair, coating a knot of demons. Green dripped down the horns of an asura, who bellowed in fury. Aiden dashed forward, knocking the sword from the asura's hand and jabbing him in the forehead with the hilt of his scimitar.

"Keep throwing!" yelled Aru. She looked around frantically for the Sleeper but didn't see him anywhere. What was he up to?

More fruit volleyed through the air….

Soon the army, which seemed to fill the whole grove, was dotted with color, as though the soldiers had been playing a game of paintball.

A wash of white from a giant apple splattered on the ground before the Potatoes, catching the tails of a pair of nagas who were trying to snake toward the group.

"For *shame*!" said Rudy.

He borrowed one of Aiden's scimitars and skewered the ends of their tails to the ground. They screamed and hissed, coiling back on themselves.

Rudy dumped out the contents of his messenger bag and began tossing darkly gleaming gemstones into the horde. Howls and moans filled the air as the troops scattered.

"Nightmare stones," Rudy explained.

It was something.

But it wasn't enough.

The writhing mass of the Sleeper's army recovered and they marched and slunk, ran and dove toward them. There had to be dozens of the Sleeper's soldiers, whereas there were only six on Aru's team. There was no way they could win. The words of Sheela's prophecy set fire to Aru's nerves.

No war can be won without finding that root....
In five days the treasure will bloom and fade,
And all that was won could soon be unmade.

Only Kalpavriksha could bring an end to this fight. And Aru knew she couldn't find the tree by herself. With Vajra, she blasted back another stretch of foggy shadows. Once the air had cleared, the thorny cocoon holding the twins rolled toward them.

Mini forged a protective shield over the twins. While Brynne, Aiden, and Rudy handled the enemy, the cocoon broke open. Sheela and Nikita stood inside, with one tiny difference:

They'd switched clothes.

"I know where the Tree of Wishes is," Nikita whispered breathlessly to Aru. "I heard it in the ground."

"You have to take me," said Aru.

"Nikki," said Sheela, clutching her twin tightly.

"It's okay…" said Nikita. "We'll be right back, I promise. You're safer with these guys."

Aru fought back the panic rising inside her. "We *will* protect you," she said firmly. "Trust me."

Sheela looked up at her, a flash of silver lighting up her blue eyes. "I do."

"Go!" yelled Mini. She lowered the protective shield and turned the Potatoes—plus Sheela—invisible instead.

Nikita tugged on Aru's hand, and together they sprinted through the chaos, weaving in and out of the trees, until they squeezed through a crack in the wall.

FORTY-SEVEN

We're Not Lost, Are We?

"Where are we going?" asked Aru. "Wasn't that Aranyani's Grove back there?"

Nikita pulled Aru along and summoned walls of vines to hide them. As they ran, the battle sounds behind them faded.

After a few minutes, Nikita stopped in front of a tall boulder. She breathed heavily as she conjured one last vine screen behind them.

"It's here," said Nikita.

Uh, Aru wanted to say, *this is just a big rock.*

The sound of whispering made her jump. With an invisible enemy, every noise was treacherous. But when she looked around, she saw no sign of the Sleeper—no trampled grass or shadow out of place. She sensed no hum of dark magic.

Another whisper skittered past. Vajra sprang off her wrist and sparked to life as a short spear.

"Listen," said Nikita, pressing her ear to the boulder. As soon as she touched it, silver rivulets ran down the rock.

Aru took a closer look and saw that it wasn't water, but an endless skein of silvery threads. They looked like hammered pieces of ice that had been enchanted to flow smoothly.

A chorus of voices lifted into the air:

"I should have told her that I loved her...."

"I should have returned home when Mother fell ill...."

"I should have spent my life appreciating what I had, rather than always seeking more...."

"I should have—"

"I should have—"

"I should have—"

The rock was weeping people's regrets. The moment Aru heard them, her necklace glowed softly, as if answering a call.

Nikita placed her hands on the boulder, and a crack split it down the middle. The sides swung in like doors. They stepped through, and the rock seamed shut behind them.

The Pandava sisters found themselves standing at the base of an enormous tree. It was so huge that Aru couldn't get a sense of how wide the trunk was. It seemed to disappear into the shimmery mist crawling in from every side. Huge silver roots bulged out of the ground, towering over them. A thick carpet of autumn leaves edged in frost crunched underfoot. The tree's bark looked like the surface of a mirror, and etched into it was script in a language Aru didn't recognize. But even though she couldn't read what it said, she somehow understood that the tree protected something important, as if the pulse of the universe flowed beneath its roots.

Aru looked up and *up*, and still she could not see where the branches started. The more she strained her eyes, the less she could detect beyond a feeling of incomprehensible vastness, as if the tree held not just leaves but forgotten civilizations and the names of dead kings, lengthy histories that had passed on to the realm of myth, and stories so numerous that they outnumbered the stars.

"Is this Kalpavriksha?" she asked in awe.

Nikita shook her head. "That's a world tree. Meant to nourish the universe and hold it up. But the wish-granting tree is close.... I can feel it. Maybe it's around the trunk—"

Crash!

The rock door burst open, and shadows poured through, rolling into a black shape that towered to nearly eight feet. Within the cloudy form, Aru caught the flash of two eyes: one blue, one brown.

The Sleeper.

He stretched out a hand cloaked in darkness. His fingers ended in sharp red-tinged claws and he curled them in a terrible summons:

"Show me the wish-granting tree," he growled. "It was always supposed to be mine."

Aru flung Vajra at him, but he batted it away as if it were a gnat. Vajra emitted an electrical yelp before bounding back to Aru.

"Run, Aru!" screamed Nikita. "Go!"

"I won't leave you!" said Aru.

Nikita slammed her palms together. Roses of every size and color cascaded down her body like a ball gown unfurling. Their branches reached for the shadows and grew around the Sleeper, trapping him in a net of thorns. He roared and thrashed inside, drawing the darkness around him like a protective cape.

"Go," choked out Nikita as she reinforced the cage. "I'll keep him busy here."

"I don't want to leave you," said Aru, her voice breaking.

Nikita looked at her, her blue eyes wide, her smile shaky and fragile. "But sometimes you have to…. I can fight. Fierce and fashionable, remember?"

Her chin wobbled, and Aru hated that she'd dragged Nikita into this. Every part of Aru wanted to stay with her sister, but if she didn't find the tree, none of them would make it out and the Otherworld would be destroyed. Tears pricked at her eyes, but Aru needed to be strong. For both of them.

"I'll be quick," said Aru. "I'll fix this. I swear it."

As she turned on her heel and sprinted off, she heard Nikita's voice carrying over the air.

"I believe you."

Aru raced around the vast trunk of the world tree, feeling foolish. There were no other trees in plain sight. Where would you even hide a miracle as magnificent as Kalpavriksha?

The silvery fog rolled to her right. Part of her was tempted to run into it and see if the tree was hiding there, but something stayed her impulse. Whenever she looked too long at the silver mist, her necklace burned.

As if telling her, *No, not there.*

Aru slowed to a stop. She risked a glance over her shoulder. She couldn't hear the Sleeper anymore. Or, she thought with a pang, Nikita. It was as if Aru had stepped into another realm entirely.

Around her was nothing but fog, and the massive mirrored trunk and…

Aru paused.

A golden tree no taller than a book nestled against a bulging root. She'd almost missed it as her eyes swept over her surroundings, but now she thought she could detect a faint glow around it. Aru stepped closer. Waves of magic poured from it, thickening the air.

Aru took a deep breath and touched her mother's necklace for luck.

Then she closed her eyes and wrapped her hand around the trunk of the tiny tree.

FORTY-EIGHT

Ignorance Is Bliss

Aru blinked.

Gone was the world tree. Gone was, well, everything. She was standing in a chamber filled with golden light. The ceiling above her looked like interwoven branches made of sunlight. And before her stood a woman.

Make that a *goddess*.

"So, you located Kalpavriksha," said the woman, smiling. "I must admit, even *I* am impressed."

Aru stared at her. The goddess wore a simple linen shirt and dark jeans. Her black hair was pulled into a high bun. Her skin was the color of rich earth, and her eyes looked like hardened sap beneath thick eyebrows. She had a hooked nose and a mouth that seemed made for smiling. She was beautiful, but in an unexpected way. Like raindrops on a spider's web—invisible unless you take the time to notice them.

"You…You're…"

"Aranyani," said the goddess, inclining her chin ever so slightly.

The elusive goddess of the forest, and guardian of Kalpavriksha.

"Not quite what you were expecting?" she guessed.

"I, um…" stammered Aru.

Yes seemed like the exact wrong thing to say.

"I see," said Aranyani, still smiling. "And you've come all this way to find Kalpavriksha because…?"

"Because of the war coming to the Otherworld," said Aru.

But as she spoke, the words didn't sit right on her tongue.

"Because of the war," repeated Aranyani. "Because wars are so often won on wishes?"

"But the prophecy—" started Aru.

"Ah, yes. Let me see if I can recall it.…*One treasure is false, and one treasure is lost, but the tree at the heart is the only true cost. No war can be won without finding that root; no victory had without the yield of its fruit. In five days the treasure will bloom and fade, and all that was won could soon be unmade.*"

"Yeah," said Aru weakly. "That one."

"And where does it mention wishing?" Aranyani asked.

Aru was stunned into silence. In her mind, she ran through all the reasons she had been sure Kalpavriksha was at the heart of the prophecy: the fake tree in the heavens; Opal's nasty words; the growing threat in the heavenly and mortal realms, even the fact that her own father had been after the treasure.

Aru swallowed hard. "But it *has* to be Kalpavriksha, because we found the fake one—"

"Let me ask you again, daughter of the god of thunder," said Aranyani. "Where does it mention wishes?"

"It…It doesn't…. But it was the only thing that made sense!" said Aru, panic rising in her. "We need to win the war! And it mentions the 'tree at the heart.' I thought…I thought we needed it to win. Like…the victors would be the ones who made a wish?"

Aranyani's face softened. "Oh, child. You know so much and yet so little. I pity you for that."

Aru's heart sank. Her family was outside this place, *waiting* for her to complete the mission. Nikita might have sacrificed herself just to get Aru to this moment, and all the goddess had to offer was *pity*? Vajra flickered angrily.

"You have come here to make a wish, and you may do so," said Aranyani.

A spark of hope ignited in Aru.

"This is the last place all who seek Kalpavriksha must enter," the goddess continued. "It is called the Grove of Regret." Aranyani gestured at the space around them.

Only then did Aru notice the same kind of soft whispers that had run down the boulder. The repeating chant of *I should have, I should have, I should have.*

"Should you choose to make a wish, know that regret will follow it," said Aranyani. "See for yourself, daughter of the gods."

Aranyani swept her right hand across the air. A strong wind blew against Aru, causing her to shut her eyes and hold her necklace in place. The touch made Suyodhana's memories flash through Aru's head like a biopic—how he'd grown up alone and without a family, how his brilliance had won over his teachers, how he had named her to be a light in the darkness.

Aru opened her eyes and saw that she'd been plunged into another vision. She looked around, familiarity jolting her. It was home—*her* home in the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture.

Her mother, young and beautiful, stood at the bottom of the staircase. She wore a long black dress and her hair was done up fancily, as if she'd just come back from a date. A man stood before her, his hands behind his back. It was odd to see Suyodhana so nervous when he was usually so confident.

"I told you I don't want flowers," said Krithika Shah with a coy smile.

Aru knew that well enough. Every Valentine's Day, whenever someone sent her mother flowers, they always ended up in the trash bin.

"I remember," Suyodhana said.

He pulled a bouquet from behind his back. It was definitely not your average arrangement. It was a metal sculpture of a dozen roses made out of gears and clockworks.

"You asked me to give you something that I want but can't have," he said.

Krithika blushed. "I was only joking—"

"The only thing I want is more time with you," he said.

The vision jumped ahead, and this time Suyodhana was older, dressed in the dusty travel clothes he'd worn when he went to Mr. V for the impossible key, when he sacrificed the memories of his upbringing, and when he crossed the chakora birds and gave away the secret of Aru's name.

There were lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before, and his face looked like it had never known a smile. He stood in the same place Aru was now, in a room of golden light before the goddess of the forest.

"If you choose this path," Aranyani warned him, "you will miss the birth of your child. You will give up the memory of ever loving your wife. Is that what this wish is worth to you, Suyodhana?"

His shoulders sagged.

"I've given you almost everything," he said. "But what you ask for now…it is too steep a price."

Aranyani bowed her head. "Then what will you do?"

Suyodhana swallowed hard, raising his head for the first time.

"I will not be defeated," he said hoarsely. "I will find a way to avoid this destiny. Krithika will help me, and together, we'll stop this. But I'm not…I refuse to give up my family."

"Then go home," said Aranyani sadly. "Go to them."

Aru wanted the visions to stop. She didn't want to know any more. She certainly didn't want to *see* it.

But there was more.

In the next vision, Hanuman and Urvashi were sitting beside a very pregnant Krithika.

"I believe in him," said Krithika firmly.

"What you're doing is reckless…. The Council has been calling you selfish, Krithika," said Hanuman. "You know the danger he poses, what he is destined to do! He's fated to destroy this age."

"Prophecies are uncertain things," she shot back.

"Maybe so," said Urvashi. "But what are you willing to risk in order to find out if you're correct?" At this, the apsara's gaze deliberately dropped to Krithika's swollen belly.

Krithika's hand moved to her torso, and she glared at them.

Urvashi sighed, and she reached out to hold Krithika's hands. "I know more than most what we must sacrifice for the ones we love…but think of the greater good. And where has he been while you've had to tend to yourself and your child all alone? He's been gone for months…."

"But he went to protect us—" said Krithika.

For the first time, her voice wavered with uncertainty.

"And if he fails?" asked Hanuman. "What then?"

The vision shifted once more. Aru wanted to fall to the ground, cover her head, and make everything stop. But Aranyani wasn't done with her yet. Aru didn't know how much more she could take. Already, something deep inside her felt pulled tight to the point of snapping.

Images swam before her—more recent this time—showing a dark alley in the human world. Boo fluttered to a lamppost, squawking anxiously. From the gloomy depths of the passage, shadows poured forth, coalescing into the murky shape of the Sleeper.

"I hear you have a proposition for me, old friend."

"I am not your friend!" said Boo angrily.

"Details…details." The Sleeper laughed. "I know how long you've been seeking a release from your curse. And now that you've learned the Kalpavriksha in the Nandana Gardens is a lie, you seem to be out of options. So speak. And do not waste my time."

Boo's feathers fluffed around him. He closed his eyes. "The Pandava twins are being moved to the House of the Moon for safekeeping," he said. "I will…I will loosen one of the carriage doors so you may take the one who can lead you to Kalpavriksha. If you don't wish to be followed, you must remove her celestial tracking device. But you must swear on whatever remains of your soul that you will not hurt her."

The shadows twitched. "And in return?"

"In return," said Boo, lifting his head, "you will share the Tree of Wishes with me should you find it."

The shadows paused. Deep within the folds of gloom, the Sleeper laughed. "Do you have such little faith in your charges, Subala?"

Boo puffed out in indignation. "They are young, but full of potential. Still…I do not know that they can succeed. And I would not lose the chance of regaining my true form, for only then can I protect them from *you*."

The visions finally came to an end.

And the part of Aru that had been stretched so taut finally broke.

FORTY-NINE

The Fury of a Pandava Scorned

The chamber walls melted away, and Aru found herself kneeling on the ground before Aranyani and Kalpavriksha.

Aru couldn't stop shaking. She couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face. She wanted to pull herself together, but it seemed impossible.

It felt like all the air in the world had disappeared. And not just the air, but the world itself—the world she thought she'd known, full of people she loved and who had loved her in return, had been yanked out from beneath her feet like a carpet, so she didn't know where to step, where to turn….

Whom to trust.

Trust was the knife that had finally cut loose an emotion she hadn't realized she could feel:

Fury.

She felt it coursing through her veins like blood, thrumming in her body like a whole new pulse. She was more fury than girl. More fury than Pandava.

Aru heard her mother's broken voice: *When I saw how much he had changed, I didn't know what to do.*

Aru wanted to claw through time, to scream at Hanuman and Urvashi to leave her mother alone, to show them everything Suyodhana had suffered simply because he'd *loved his family*. He had loved them enough to sacrifice a wish that would have given him a future. Her father had been stolen from her through no fault of his own. It was the devas' fault. It was her mother's fault. It was everyone's fault *but* his.

She inhaled a shaky breath before her thoughts turned to Boo….

Boo, who liked to perch on her head, and eat Oreos from her hands, and sleep in her home, and nag her to floss every night and take her vitamins. Boo, who had loved her and taught her, but betrayed her sisters anyway.

Sheela's words from the dream took on a whole new light.

He's making a terrible mistake….

And you will hate him for his love.

"I do hate him," she choked out. "I *hate* him."

A bright glow fell over Aru. She looked up, almost shocked to realize Aranyani was still standing before her. She wanted to get out of here, return to her friends, but Aranyani's gaze held her in place.

"This is the price of your wish, child," said Aranyani, tilting up her chin with two fingers. "*Knowledge*. Do you understand? This will be your regret, the thing you must always carry should you decide to use Kalpavriksha's power." She pointed to the necklace. "You are too young to bear such burdens, and I can remove that last vision from your memory. I can take you back to your friends. I can even have the grove swallow up the Sleeper's army, though I cannot stop the war. It's up to you. If you choose to bear this weight, go ahead and speak your wish."

Aru didn't care if it was cowardly—she almost grabbed Aranyani's hand and begged her to take this piece of knowledge away, to hide it from her forever. It *was* too much to hold—her heart didn't have the room. Her friends would be okay. The Otherworld would survive. No one needed her to carry this. They'd all stay safe….

Safe for now, whispered a voice in her head. *And after that?*

Aru remembered the venomous words Opal had spat at them, telling them they weren't good enough, hadn't proven themselves yet. Aru thought of the doubt that had been growing in her heart—the doubt she'd pushed aside because she thought it made her untrustworthy, the "untrue" sister. All this time, it hadn't been *she* who was untrustworthy, but *them*.

The devas. The Council. The teachers—Urvashi, Hanuman, and Boo—who had held her hand and promised not to let her fall.

She didn't want to fight for them.

But the Sleeper was no better. She'd seen the bleakness in his eyes, the ruthlessness of his army, and the pain and destruction they'd wrought on the mortal realm and the Otherworld. What had happened to Suyodhana wasn't his fault, but what he was doing now wasn't right either.

More than anything, she wanted the world to be uncomplicated, for right and wrong to be as easily divided as the black and white sections of an Oreo. But the world was not a cookie. And sometimes right and wrong was nothing more than a frame held up to the eye, the view always changing depending on who held it.

Only one thing felt *right* to Aru.

Her sisters and friends. Strong Brynne and her fragility. Shy Mini and her secret strength. Nikita and Sheela, who didn't deserve to be abandoned or treated like puppets by the Council. Aiden, who only tried to capture beauty in the world. Even Rudy, who had so much more to offer than what his family believed.

She would fight for them. She would wish for *them*. No matter what that meant for herself.

Aru wrapped her hand around the little golden tree once again. She looked up at Aranyani, her gaze unflinching and her voice steely as she said, "I wish we win."

FIFTY

The Word Aru Never Spoke

The Sleeper's army was winning.

Aru did not know how she had arrived back on the battlefield, but she was there. As she surveyed the scene, she fiddled nervously with her necklace and found that a third bead had been added to it, containing all that she had seen in Aranyani's Grove of Regret.

Beneath her, the ground was splattered with paint and broken tree limbs. She looked to her friends, her stomach sinking.

Brynne swiped at the air with her wind mace, but her movements were too slow. Mini cast a force field, the light weak and wavering. Aiden was limping and down to one scimitar. Sheela crouched on the ground, one hand on Nikita, who was slumped over unconscious. Rudy slithered this way and that, blocking onslaughts with his tail, blood oozing from his arm.

"STOP!" she called out.

At the center of all the destruction writhed the dark mass of the Sleeper. The shadows paused at her voice, twitching with awareness. His army of demons and rakshasas halted, panting and turning their gaze to her.

The shadows knitted themselves into a pillar, and then peeled back to reveal the Sleeper standing in a charcoal *sherwani*, with dark pants that

ended in coiling wisps of smoke. The sight jarred her. She couldn't look at him without seeing Suyodhana, like two semitranslucent images stacked on top of each other. One was the father who had loved her. The other was her greatest enemy, the primary threat to the world she loved and the people in it.

"I was willing to let you all go…to let you *live*," he said. "But I find my mercy has run dry." The Sleeper raised a hand, and Aru sensed that a part of him knew what she was going to do even before it happened.

She snapped her fingers, and Vajra flattened into a hoverboard beneath her feet.

Go, she urged.

The hoverboard zoomed forward, heading straight to the Sleeper.

"No, Aru!" screamed Mini.

But she didn't listen. She wasn't listening to anyone except herself. Aru wasn't sure what guided her in that second, but her hands seemed to move of their own accord. The Sleeper's army moved closer, and he was now ten feet away, now five….

With one sharp tug, Aru removed the necklace at her throat. The three beads of memories winked in the light.

The Sleeper spread his arms wide.

In another world—in another *life*—it would have looked like a hug.

Aru struggled to keep her eyes open as the shadows leaped up and wrapped around her legs and stomach, squeezing her like snakes. She flung her arms around the Sleeper's neck and cinched the pendant of memories in back. As the shadows overtook her and the world went gray at the edges, Aru found that she had the strength to say one last thing.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

EPILOGUE

Aru stirred.

Snatches of dreams and memories fluttered through her. Shadows. Darkness. The feeling of being gathered and held close…

Someone in the dark speaking her name as if it were a question…

"Arundhati?"

A sudden rush of cold.

Aru opened her eyes. She was in front of a dark cave. But she was not alone. There was another girl sitting across from her, the same age as Aru. She had long black hair, high cheekbones like a model, and catlike eyes. There was something uncannily familiar about her face. Aru felt as if she'd seen it before, only she didn't know where.

"I'm Kara," the girl said.

Aru raised her hands, struggling to break free, but her hands were tied and a steel chain attached her to the cave wall.

She dimly remembered Mini screaming *No, Aru!* and the sensation of slick shadows hauling her off the hoverboard….

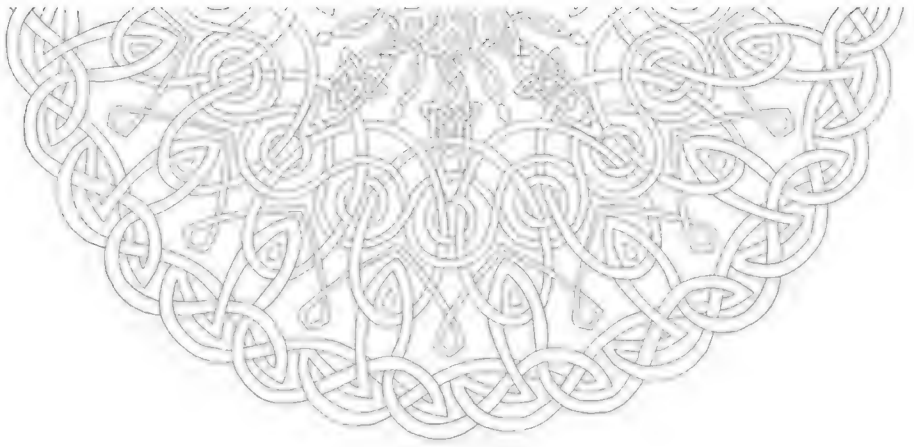
Vajra! she thought. She looked down and was flooded with relief when she saw her lightning bolt firmly attached to her wrist.

"Where am I?"

Kara smiled sympathetically. "You're in the house of the Sleeper, Aru Shah."

"So, then, who are you?"

Kara lifted her chin. "*I'm* his daughter."



GLOSSARY

AHA! YOU'RE BACK! I knew it. Good job, me. As always, I'd like to preface this glossary by saying that this is by no means exhaustive or encapsulating of all the nuances of mythology. India is GINORMOUS, and these myths and legends vary from state to state. What you read here is merely a slice of what *I* understand from the stories *I* was told and the research *I* conducted. The wonderful thing about mythology is that its arms are wide enough to embrace many traditions from many regions. My hope is that this glossary gives you context for Aru's world, and perhaps nudges you to do some research of your own. ☺

Adrishya (UH-drish-yah) Hindi for *invisible* or *disappear*.

Agni (UHG-nee) The Hindu god of fire.

Amaravati (uh-MAR-uh-vah-tee) So, I have suffered the great misfortune of never being invited to/having visited this legendary city, but I hear it's, like, *amazing*. It has to be, considering it's the place where Lord Indra lives. It's draped in gold palaces and has celestial gardens full of a thousand marvels. I wonder what the flowers smell like there. I imagine they smell like birthday cake, because it's basically heaven.

Ammamma (UH-muh-mah) *Grandmother* in Telugu, one of the many languages spoken in India, most commonly in the southern area.

Amrita (am-REE-tuh) The immortal drink of the gods. According to the legends, Sage Durvasa once cursed the gods to lose their immortality. To get it back, they had to churn the celestial Ocean of Milk. But in order to accomplish this feat, they had to seek assistance from the asuras, another semidivine race of beings who were constantly at war with the devas. In return for their help, the asuras demanded that the devas share a taste of the amrita. Which, you know, *fair*. But to gods, the word *fair* is just another word. So they tricked the asuras. The supreme god Vishnu, also known as the preserver, took on the form of Mohini, a beautiful enchantress. The asuras and devas lined up in two rows. While Mohini poured the amrita, the asuras were so mesmerized by her beauty that they didn't realize that she was giving *all* the immortality nectar to the gods and not them. Rude! By the way, I have no idea what amrita tastes like. Probably birthday cake.

Apsara (AHP-sah-rah) Apsaras are beautiful, heavenly dancers who entertain in the Court of the Heavens. They're often the wives of heavenly musicians. In Hindu myths, apsaras are usually sent on errands by Lord Indra to break the meditation of sages who are getting a little too powerful. It's pretty hard to keep meditating when a celestial nymph starts dancing in front of you. And if you scorn her affection (as Arjuna did in the *Mahabharata*), she might just curse you. Just sayin'.

Aranyani (UH-rahn-YAH-nee) The Hindu goddess of forests and animals, who is married to the god of horsemanship, Revanta. She is famously elusive, which means we might never know *what* her Hogwarts House is. Alas.

Ashvin Twins (ASH-vin) The gods of sunrise and sunset, and healing. They are the sons of the sun god, Surya, and fathers of the Pandava twins, Nakula and Sahadeva. They're considered the doctors of the gods and are often depicted with the faces of horses.

Asura (AH-soo-rah) A sometimes good, sometimes bad race of semidivine beings. They're most popularly known from the story about the churning of the Ocean of Milk.

Chakora (CHUH-kor-uh) A mythical bird that is said to live off moonbeams. Imagine a really pretty chicken that shuns corn kernels for

moondust, which, to be honest, sounds way yummier anyway.

Chandra (CHUHN-drah) The handsome god of the moon, who often gets into trouble. There are a lot of myths about why the moon waxes and wanes. In one, it is said that Chandra had a favorite wife among the twenty-seven sister constellations he was married to. The wives' father, Daksha, didn't like the fact that Chandra wasn't treating all of them equally, so he cursed him to wither. But Chandra appealed to the Lord of Destruction (see **Shiva**) and the curse was softened. In another story, Chandra laughed at the elephant-headed god Ganesh, who was so offended he chucked a tusk at the moon god and cursed him "never to be whole again." Er, at least not for a very long period of time.

Daksha (DUCK-shah) A celestial king and one of the sons of Lord Brahma, the god of creation. Daksha had *lots* of daughters. Like at least fifty. And he was a super-protective dad. If a husband mistreated his girls, he'd curse him to the brink of extinction. Seriously. Just ask Chandra.

Danda (DAHN-duh) A giant punishing rod that is often considered the symbol of the Dharma Raja, the god of the dead.

Devas (DEH-vahz) The Sanskrit term for the race of gods.

Dharma Raja (DAR-mah RAH-jah) The Lord of Death and Justice, and the father of the oldest Pandava brother, Yudhistira. His mount is a water buffalo.

Draupadi (DROH-puh-dee) Princess Draupadi was the wife of the five Pandava brothers. Yup, you read that right—all five. See, once upon a time, her hand was offered in marriage to whoever could do this great archery feat, etc.... and Arjuna won, because Arjuna. When he came home, he jokingly told his mom (who had her back to him and was praying), "I won something!" To which his mother said: "Share equally with your brothers." The rest must've been an awkward convo. Anyway. Draupadi was famously outspoken and independent, and she condemned those who wronged her family. In some places she is revered as a goddess in her own right. When the Pandavas eventually made their journey to heaven, Draupadi was the first to fall down and die in response (PS: She loved Arjuna more than her other husbands). Mythology is harsh.

Dwarka (DWAHR-kah) An ancient kingdom ruled over by the god king Krishna. Dwarka is still a populous city in India, located in the state of Gujarat.

Gandharva (gun-DAR-ruh-vuh) A semidivine race of heavenly beings known for their cosmic musical skills.

Ganesh (guh-NESH) The elephant-headed god of luck and new beginnings. In prayers, many Hindus often invoke Ganesh first to remove all obstacles. Ganesh loves sweets, is even-tempered and wise, and rides a tiny mouse. (It must be a very strong mouse, because Ganesh ain't a tiny elephant-headed god.) When I was a kid, I was always deeply curious about why he had an elephant's head. Turns out, he did the number one thing to ensure decapitation: ANGER SHIVA, THE LORD OF DESTRUCTION. Seriously, gods! When will you *learn*?! Weird twist, though: Ganesh is Shiva's son. It's just that, well, the god of destruction didn't know it. One day, Shiva left to go run errands, and his wife built a little boy out of turmeric to guard her while she took a bubble bath. Shiva came home, hauling all those bulky bags from Trader Joe's, and demanded to be let inside. His son, who had never met him, was like "Get lost, old man!" Shiva didn't like that. The grocery line had been very long, and he was tired! So. He. Chopped. Off. The. Boy's. Head. As one does. Then he strolled inside, where he had to face the wrath of one furious goddess. Panicked, he dashed into the jungle, where his eyes fell upon an elephant. He chopped off the elephant's head, stuck it on the boy to bring him back to life, and, voilà, you have an aptly named god of new beginnings.

Garuda (GUH-roo-DAH) The king of the birds and the mount of Lord Vishnu, the god of preservation. He's also known as the enemy of serpents.

Hanuman (HUH-noo-mahn) One of the main figures in the Indian epic the *Ramayana*, who was known for his devotion to the god king Rama and Rama's wife, Sita. Hanuman is the son of Vayu, the god of the wind, and Anjana, an apsara. He had lots of mischievous exploits as a kid, including mistaking the sun for a mango and trying to eat it. There are still temples and shrines dedicated to Hanuman, and he's often worshipped by wrestlers because of his incredible strength. He's the half brother of Bhima, the second-oldest Pandava brother.

Holi (HO-lee) A major Hindu festival, also known as the "festival of colors" or "festival of love," in which people feast and throw colored powders at one another. There are many different interpretations of the meaning of Holi and what the colors signify, depending on which region of India one's family is from. My family celebrates the triumph of good over evil, represented by the tale of Narasimha (see: **Narasimha**), who protected the devout son of a demon king.

Indra (IN-druh) The king of heaven, and the god of thunder and lightning. He is the father of Arjuna, the third-oldest Pandava brother. His main weapon is Vajra, a lightning bolt. He has two vahanas: Airavata, the white elephant who spins clouds, and Uchchaihshravas, the seven-headed white horse. I've got a pretty good guess what his favorite color is....

Kadru (KAH-droo) One of the daughters of Daksha (told you he had a lot of girls!); considered the mother of snakes.

Kalpavriksha (kuhl-PUHV-rik-shaw) A divine wish-fulfilling tree. It is said to have roots of gold and silver, with boughs encased in costly jewels, and to reside in the paradise gardens of the god Indra. Sounds like a pretty useful thing to steal. Or protect. Just saying.

Kashyapa (KUSH-yup-ah) A powerful sage and father of Garuda, king of the birds.

Krishna (KRISH-nah) A major Hindu deity. He is worshipped as the eighth reincarnation of the god Vishnu and also as a supreme ruler in his own right. He is the god of compassion, tenderness, and love, and is popular for his charmingly mischievous personality.

Kubera (KOO-bear-uh) The god of riches and ruler of the legendary golden city of Lanka. He's often depicted as a dwarf adorned with jewels. Pretty sure we haven't seen the last of him...hint-hint, wink-wink, nudge-nudge for any readers checking out this glossary.

Lanka (LAHN-kuh) The legendary city of gold, sometimes ruled over by Kubera, sometimes ruled over by his demonic brother, Ravana. Lanka is a major setting in the epic poem the *Ramayana*.

Mahabharata (MAH-hah-BAR-ah-tah) One of two Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India (the other being the *Ramayana*). It is an important source of information about the development of Hinduism between 400 BCE

and 200 CE and tells the story of the struggle between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

Maruts (MAH-roots) Minor storm deities often described as violent and aggressive and carrying lots of weapons. Legend says the Maruts once rode through the sky, splitting open clouds so that rain could fall on the earth.

Mohini (moe-HIH-nee) One of the avatars of Lord Vishnu, known as the goddess of enchantment. The gods and asuras banded together to churn the Ocean of Milk on the promise that the nectar of immortality would be shared among them. But the gods didn't want immortal demon counterparts, so Mohini tricked the asuras by pouring the nectar into the goblets of the gods while smiling over her shoulder at the demons.

Naga (**nagas**, pl.) (NAG-uh) A naga (male) or nagini (female) is one of a group of serpentine beings who are magical and, depending on the region in India, considered divine. Among the most famous nagas is Vasuki, one of the king serpents who was used as a rope when the gods and asuras churned the Ocean of Milk to get the elixir of life. Another is Uloopi, a nagini princess who fell in love with Arjuna, married him, and used a magical gem to save his life.

Nakshatra (NUCK-shut-rah) The collective name of the twenty-seven constellations married to Lord Chandra, god of the moon.

Nakula (nuh-KOO-luh) The most handsome Pandava brother, and a master of horses, swordsmanship, and healing. He is the twin of Sahadeva, and they are the children of the Ashvin twins.

Nandana (NUN-dah-nah) A mythical garden located in the heavens.

Narasimha (NUHR-sihm-hah) A fearsome avatar of Lord Vishnu. Once, there was a demon king who was granted a boon. In typical tyrant fashion, he asked for invincibility, specifically: "I don't want to be killed at daytime or nighttime; indoors or outdoors; by man or by beast; and by no weapon." Then he was like "GOTCHA!" and proceeded to wreak havoc on the world. The only one who didn't fall in line with his plans was his son, Prahlad, who devoutly worshipped Lord Vishnu. To protect Prahlad and defeat the demon king, Vishnu appeared one day in the demon king's courtyard (not indoors or outdoors); at dusk (not daytime or nighttime); in the form of a man with the head of a lion (not by man or by beast) and then dragged the king onto his lap and ripped

him apart with his claws (not a weapon)! And that, children, is why you should always have a lawyer review your wishes. Loopholes are persnickety things. Why the gods went to all that trouble is a mystery to me. After all, they could've just sent a girl. Bam! Riddle solved.

Pandava brothers (Arjuna, Yudhistira, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva) (PAN-dah-vah, ar-JOO-nah, yoo-diss-TEE-ruh, BEE-muh, nuh-KOO-luh, saw-hah-DAY-vuh) Demigod warrior princes, and the heroes of the epic *Mahabharata* poem. Arjuna, Yudhistira, and Bhima were born to Queen Kunti, the first wife of King Pandu. Nakula and Sahadeva were born to Queen Madri, the second wife of King Pandu.

Rahuketu (RAH-hoo-KEH-too) The ascending and descending lunar nodes in the sky, responsible for eclipses. Originally, Rahuketu was one being…but when it tried to drink some of the immortal nectar, Lord Vishnu chopped off its head. They still got immortality—it's just divided between their two halves.

Rakshasa (RUCK-shaw-sah) A rakshasa (male) or rakshasi (female) is a mythological being, like a demigod. Sometimes good and sometimes bad, they are powerful sorcerers, and can change shape to take on any form.

Rama (RAH-mah) The hero of the epic poem the *Ramayana*. He was the seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu.

Ramayana (RAH-mah-YAWN-uh) One of the two great Sanskrit epic poems (the other being the *Mahabharata*), it describes how the god king Rama, aided by his brother and the monkey-faced demigod Hanuman, rescue his wife, Sita, from the ten-headed demon king, Ravana.

Ravana (RAH-vah-nah) A character in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, where he is depicted as the ten-headed demon king who stole Rama's wife, Sita. Ravana is described as having once been a follower of Shiva. He was also a great scholar, a capable ruler, a master of the *veena* (a musical instrument), and someone who wished to overpower the gods. He's one of my favorite antagonists, to be honest, because it just goes to show that the line between heroism and villainy can be a bit murky.

Sahadeva (SAW-hah-DAY-vuh) The twin to Nakula, and the wisest of the Pandavas. He was known to be a great swordsman and also a brilliant

astrologist, but he was cursed that if he should disclose events before they happened, his head would explode.

Sanskrit (SAHN-skrit) An ancient language of India. Many Hindu scriptures and epic poems are written in Sanskrit.

Shani (SHAH-nee) The Lord of Saturn and also the Lord of Justice. One day, his wife was super annoyed that he wasn't bothering to look at her (#relatable) and cursed him so that his gaze would be forever devastating, thus forcing his eyes always downward. But the curse was eventually lifted when, based on his karmic actions, he took on the title Lord of Justice.

Shiva (SHEE-vuh) One of the three main gods in the Hindu pantheon, often associated with destruction. He is also known as the Lord of Cosmic Dance. His consort is Parvati.

Takshaka (TAHK-shah-kah) A naga king and former friend of Indra who once lived in the Khandava Forest before Arjuna helped burn it down, killing most of Takshaka's family. He swore vengeance on all the Pandavas ever since. Wonder why…

Urvashi (OOR-vah-shee) A famous apsara, considered the most beautiful of all the apsaras. Her name literally means *she who can control the hearts of others*.

Vimana (VEE-mah-nuh) A flying chariot or palace. I have inquired at many a car dealership as to where I can procure such a thing. Each time, I have been escorted outside and asked not to return. Hmph.

Vishnu (VISH-noo) The second god in the Hindu triumvirate (also known as the Trimurti). These three gods are responsible for the creation, upkeep, and destruction of the world. The other two gods are Brahma and Shiva. Brahma is the creator of the universe, and Shiva is the destroyer. Vishnu is worshipped as the preserver. He has taken many forms on earth in various avatars, most notably as Krishna, Mohini, and Rama.

Vishwakarma (VISH-wah-kur-MAH) The god of architecture, believed to be the original engineer who taught humans how to build long-lasting monuments. Some of his greatest hits include Lanka, the city of gold, and the city of Dwarka.

Yaksha (YAHK-sha) A yaksha (male) or yakshini (female) is a supernatural being from Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain mythology. Yakshas are attendees of Kubera, the Hindu god of wealth, who rules in the mythical Himalayan kingdom of Alaka.

Yali (YAH-lee) A mythical creature that can be a composite of all kinds of animals, like lions and crocodiles and antelopes. They are believed to protect and guard the entryways of temples.

Yamuna (yuh-MOO-nah) A highly worshipped river goddess and also the name of one of the largest tributary rivers in India. Yamuna is the daughter of the sun god, Surya, and sister to Yama, the god of death.

Phew! Got all that? You definitely deserve a vacation. How does the city of gold sound?

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ROSHANI CHOKSHI is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Aru Shah and the End of Time* and *Aru Shah and the Song of Death*, the first two books in a quintet for middle grade readers about the adventures of five Pandava sisters. Her acclaimed novels for young adults include *The Star-Touched Queen*, *A Crown of Wishes*, *The Gilded Wolves*, and *The Silvered Serpents*. The Pandava series was inspired by the stories her grandmother told her, as well as Roshani's all-consuming love for *Sailor Moon*. Rosh lives in Georgia and says "y'all," but she doesn't really have a Southern accent, alas. For more information, visit her website, RoshaniChokshi.com, or follow her on Twitter @Roshani_Chokshi and Instagram @roshanichokshi.

RICK RIORDAN, dubbed "storyteller of the gods" by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Times* #1 best-selling series, including Percy Jackson and the Olympians, which brings Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. Millions of fans across the globe have enjoyed his fast-paced and funny quest adventures. The goal of Rick Riordan Presents is to publish highly entertaining books by authors from underrepresented cultures and backgrounds, to allow them to tell their own stories inspired by the mythology, folklore, and culture of their heritage. Rick's Twitter handle is @camphalfblood.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Sal & Gabi Break the Universe* by Carlos Hernandez!

TAP TO BUY

THERE'S ALL SORTS of bad advice out there about how to deal with bullies. *Ignore them. Stand up to them. Tell a teacher, tell a parent, tell your dentist while he's jamming your teeth back into your face.*

The real way to deal with a bully is to stick a raw chicken in their locker.

I had my showdown with Yasmany Robles just three days after I had started my new life at Culeco Academy of the Arts, a magnet school in the middle of Miami. To get in, you had to have good grades, pass an interview, and either submit a portfolio (for painting or writing) or audition (for theater or music). You'd think all the effort someone has to go through to get into Culeco would've kept out bullies, but I guess not.

I guess there are just too many of them in the world. If your school only allowed in kids who'd never pick on anyone, you'd have an empty school.

Whatever. It's not like I hadn't learned how to handle bullies back in Connecticut.

On Wednesday, between fourth and fifth periods, I went to the lockers, along with half a million other kids. I stowed my history book and grabbed math so I could do my homework during lunch, then opened my bag of magic tricks and put on my GOTCHA! stamp ring. We would be doing introductions in my eighth-period theater class, and I thought I could use it to demonstrate some sleight of hand. Magic is kind of my thing.

I had a minute before I needed to go, so I took out my diabetes bag and fished out my glucose meter. I thought I'd be all right until lunch, but I'd started to feel spacey and dreamy at the end of my last class. Blood sugar levels might be falling. Best to check now.

As I rummaged, I noticed the tall kid next to me struggling to get his locker open. He was as Cuban as they come: brown, built like a track-and-field champ, with a haircut so short you could see the bumpy skin of his scalp beneath what was left of his tiny curls. He'd wrestled with his combination lock yesterday, too, and never figured it out, so he'd had to carry a full backpack of books to his next class. I'd had trouble with my lock on the first day, until I'd figured out you have to squeeze it as you turn the dial.

And I'm a nice guy. So I said to him, "Hey, man. My lock sucks, too. The trick is to squeeze the top while—"

That's all I got out before he punched his locker. The whole hallway grew a little quieter.

Yasmany—I learned his name later, but why keep you in suspense?—slowly turned to look at me. He scanned me up and down, doing some tough-guy calculations to figure out if he could take me.

Apparently he thought he could, because he stepped up to me fast, ferocious, chest out, arms wide. He'd been in a lot of fights, judging from his flat-as-a-shamrock nose.

"Just come back from safari, white boy?" he asked. "I mean, if you even *are* a boy."

Let's take a second to break down this insult.

The "safari" crack was because I had on canvas cargo pants and a cargo vest, each with four pockets brimming with gadgets and tricks of the trade. Pretty much all the clothes I own have tons of pockets. I'm ready to

perform at any time. You never know when the world is going to need a little magic.

The "white boy" crack was because—I guess?—to him I looked white. Back when I lived in Connecticut, kids were telling me to "go back to brown town" all the time. But I was in Miami now: new place, new rules about skin color.

And the "if you are a boy"? I kept my hair pretty long. It gave me a place to hide stuff in the middle of a trick. And to this caveman's mind, calling someone a girl was an insult.

Whatever. I tried the *My Little Pony* approach to handling bullies. "Sorry. Just trying to help." And I started to walk away.

He body-blocked me. "*You?* Wanted to help *me*? Why would a sandwich like you think I'd need your help?"

Now I looked him in the eye. "Your locker's still locked, isn't it?"

I probably shouldn't have said anything. But he called me a sandwich. Some insults you can't let slide.

In response, he did what bullies do. He slapped my diabetes bag out of my hands.

It hit the ground with a glassy crunch. My stomach crunched right along with it.

That pack contained my insulin, my syringes, my blood-glucose meter, my sharps disposal container (for used needles), my Band-Aids, and a fun-size bag of Skittles. If he broke something important in that pack, I could be in real trouble.

I knelt down to pick it up, my hands shaking as they reached for the bag. I tried to relax. I closed my eyes, breathed slowly, and remembered what Papi had said to me after Mami died: *Fear is your body trying to tell your brain what to do. But the brain is the king of the body. It calls the shots.*

I opened my eyes slowly, the way the good guys in movies do when they've just figured out how to beat the villain. I noticed that the bright young scholars of Culeco Academy of the Arts had formed a ring around Yasmany and me. This crowd didn't seem as bloodthirsty as the ones in my last school had been. In Connecticut, kids hooted like in *Planet of the Apes* whenever a fight was about to start, jumping up and down and beating on each other in anticipation of someone getting wedgied back to

the Stone Age. But these kids looked kind of grim and quiet, like this was some boring school assembly they had to attend.

Well, from my perspective, it didn't really matter whether they were enjoying themselves or not. They had me surrounded just the same. I was trapped.

Wait. No. That's an excuse, and I don't lie to myself. I could have pushed my way out of there if I'd wanted to. But now all eyes were on me. I had an audience. And I am a showman.

Yasmany stretched his fingers wide before he made two fists. "Time to die, little man. Stand up."

I stood all right. Got right in his face. "Time to die?" I asked.

"Time. To. Die," he repeated.

"Like the dead chicken in your locker?" I asked.

"What?"

See, that's the real secret of dealing with bullies: Change the game. You thought we were going to fistfight, Mr. Tough Guy, but—surprise!—suddenly we're talking about murdered poultry.

"The dead chicken in your locker," I said, explaining it to the crowd. "That's the real reason you didn't want to open it. You didn't want anybody to see your dead chicken so they wouldn't know you keep dead chickens in your locker. Because," I said, turning to face Yasmany again, "what kind of weirdo keeps dead chickens in his locker?"

"Stop saying 'dead chicken'!"

Everybody laughed. That probably would have sent Yasmany into a berserker rage if some girl hadn't shrieked, "Blood!" She was pointing at Yasmany's locker.

"What?" Yasmany asked again. He and everybody else looked at his locker, and yeah, there was watery pink blood leaking from it, the kind you find at the bottom of Styrofoam meat packages. Not a lot, but enough to drip from the bottom of the locker door and pool on the floor. And it only takes a tiny bit of blood to freak people all the way out.

Not me, though. I mean, I didn't know SANGRE DE POLLO was going to come dripping out of his locker, but it wasn't exactly a surprise, either. I could work with it.

"Open it," I said to Yasmany. "Unless you're too…*chicken*."

If he hadn't been completely bewildered by what was happening, he would have gorilla-rushed me for sure. Instead, he walked over to his

locker and tried to undo the lock. Two, four, seven yanks on it, each angrier than the last. Then he punched his locker door again and said, "I can't open the stupid thing! I keep trying, but I can't."

"Here. Let me."

He took a step back to let me through. But not without asking, "What? How you know my combo?"

His "combo" was still taped to the back of the lock. About as sharp as a bowling ball, this Yasmany.

I looked at him over my shoulder with spooky eyes and replied, "Fool! I am a magician. I can read your mind." Then I spun the dial with fast fingers, clock-, then counter-, then clockwise again. I tugged the lock open dramatically and, with a flourish, removed it.

"You want the honors?" I asked him, stepping aside with a gracious magician's bow.

Yasmany—bro had gone full autopilot by now—stepped forward and opened the locker door, every kid behind him on tiptoe, watching, waiting.

A whole raw chicken, like you get at the grocery store, with bumpy yellow skin and no head, flipped out of his locker, landed on its chicken butt, and went *splat*.

Kids scattered, screaming. Adults would be here any second. Yasmany did a 180 and looked around wildly. He didn't have eyes anymore: just fear. "I didn't put no dead chicken in my locker!" he yelled. "You gotta believe me!"

"I believe you," I said.

Of course I did. It was I who had put it in there, after all.

Abracadabra, chicken plucker.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Tristan Strong Breaks a Hole in the Sky* by Kwame Mbalia!

TAP TO BUY

1
THE CAR RIDE

THERE WAS A RHYTHM IN my fists.

Pop pop

It told a story.

Pop pop

Everybody thought they knew the story. They'd seen it before. *He'll get over it. It's a phase. Give him space.* But they only knew fragments. They didn't want to hear the rest….

Oh, you do?

Hmm.

Well, what if I told you that I went to war over my dead best friend's glowing journal? Or that I battled monsters big and small, with powers I didn't know I had, with gods I didn't know existed. Would you believe me?

Nah, you wouldn't. You got your own problems. You don't wanna hear about my struggles. Right?

Oh, you do? Well, I gotta warn you, it's a wild ride, so buckle up, champ.

Let me give you some truth, and I hope it returns back to me.

"Tristan! They're here."

Pop

Mom's shout interrupted my groove. I stopped pummeling the small punching bag Dad had installed in my room and loosened the straps on my boxing gloves with my teeth. The gloves fell on the bed, and I dropped down next to them. Eddie's journal sat on my tiny desk in the opposite corner. Still glowing. Still unopened since his mother had given it to me after the funeral two weeks ago.

My room was so small I could've reached out and grabbed the leather book, but that would mean dealing with it, and who deals with their problems by choice?

Pffft. Not me.

"Tristan Strong!" my dad yelled from down the hall.

I hated that name.

It made me appear to be something I'm not. My name should've been Tristan Coward, or Tristan Failure, or Tristan Fake. Maybe Tristan How-Could-You-Lose-Your-First-Boxing-Match.

Anything but Tristan Strong.

Mom's footsteps echoed through our tiny apartment, and then soft knocking sounded on my door. "Tristan, baby, did you hear me?"

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'm coming."

The door opened and Mom peeked in. She was still wearing the TEAM STRONG T-shirt from last night. I don't think any of us had gotten much sleep after we came back from my first bout. I

stayed up nursing my pride, the only thing I really injured. My little fan club—Dad, Mom, and my grandparents on Dad's side—had tried to cheer me up, but I could see the disappointment written on everyone's faces, so I pretended to go to bed while they held whispered discussions into the wee hours of the morning. And now it was dawn, time to get this show on the road.

Mom's eyes took in the organized chaos of my room and crinkled when they landed on me. She crossed the floor in two steps—avoiding yesterday's untouched dinner in the process—and sat down on the mattress. "It's only for a month," she said, not even playacting that she didn't know what was wrong.

"I know."

"It'll be good for you to get away."

"I know."

She rubbed my head, then pulled me into a hug. "The grief counselor said it would be good to get a change of scenery. Some fresh air, work around the farm. Who knows, maybe you'll find out you were meant to work the land."

I shrugged. The only thing I was sure of was that I wasn't meant to be a boxer, despite what Dad and Granddad thought.

I pulled free of Mom's hug, stood, grabbed my duffel bag, and headed out to start my month of exile.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Mom asked.

I turned and she held Eddie's journal out to me. Her hand and wrist were bathed in the emerald-green glow that was coming from the cover. But, like everyone else I'd shown the journal to, she didn't notice any strange light.

Mom mistook my confused frown for apprehension as she slipped the book into my bag. "He wanted you to have it, Tristan. I know it's tough, but…try to read it when you can, okay?"

I didn't trust myself to speak, so I nodded and headed to the front door.

The decision to ship me to Granddad and Nana Strong's farm down in Alabama had been made without my input. Typical. My parents had talked about it a few times before, but after Eddie's death, and my third school fight in the final two weeks before summer break, well, I guess the time was right.

At least I'd held my own in those school fights. Unlike in the ring last night.

It was just my luck that my grandfather had been there to witness my humiliation.

"You outweighed that other kid by seven pounds!" Granddad had said after the match, in his growling rasp of a voice. "Set the family name back by a decade."

That's me—Tristan Disappointment.

Son of Alvin "Wreckin' Ball" Strong, the best middleweight boxer to come out of Chicago in nearly twenty years. I had Dad's height and Granddad's chin, and boxing was supposed to run in my veins. I'd worn Granddad's old trunks, and Dad had worked my corner. The Strong legacy was expected to take another leap forward during my first match.

Instead, it got knocked flat on its butt. Twice.

"You'll get him next time" was all Dad said, but I could tell he was let down.

And that hurt almost as much as getting punched.

An early summer heat wave greeted me with a blast of humidity as I left the apartment building with my backpack over my shoulder and my duffel bag in hand. Thick gray clouds huddled

in the distance, and I added that to the list of totally not ominous things. Glowing journal? Yep. Storm on the horizon? You betcha.

Dad and Granddad stood at the curb while Nana (no one ever called her Grandma, not if you wanted to eat) knitted in the car. Dad towered over his father, but you could see the family resemblance. Deep brown skin like mine, a wide jaw, and a proud stance. I got my hair from Mom's side of the family, thankfully, because both Strong men had identical bald spots peeking through their short afros.

"Get him in the fields, put him to work," Granddad was saying. "That'll put some fire in his belly."

Dad shrugged and said nothing. To be fair, no one did much talking when Granddad was around. That old man could yak a mile a minute.

Nana saw me coming down the stairs, dropped her knitting, and rushed out of the car. "There he is! How you doin' today, baby? Are you sore from last night?"

She gave me a hug that muffled any answer, then shooed Granddad to the side. "Get the boy's bag, Walter. Alvin," she said, addressing my father, "we've got to hit the road before that thunderstorm hits."

Granddad looked me up and down. "Is that all you kids ever wear?"

I glanced down. Black Chuck Taylors with gray untied laces. Loose khaki cargo shorts, and an even looser gray hoodie. That hoodie went with me everywhere—it had a picture of a flexed bicep on the back in faded black ink. Call me sentimental, but it's what I always wore when Eddie and I were hanging out. He called it the Tristan Strong uniform of choice, perfect for all occasions.

So yeah, I wear it a lot.

Nana shushed him and pulled me into another hug. "Don't listen to him, Tristan. I can't wait to have you back with us on the farm. You were so little last time, but them chickens you used to chase still haven't forgotten you! I packed a lunch and even rustled up a new story or two for the ride…."

And so, just like that, with a clap on the shoulder from Dad and a hug from Mom, I was someone else's problem for a month. Good-bye, Chicago, and all your glorious cable TV, internet, and cell phone service. I hardly knew ye.

One thing became very clear during the twelve-hour car ride to Alabama—I was never going to do this again.

Never ever.

Sitting in an enclosed space with Granddad was like wiping your tears with sandpaper. Painful—excruciating, even—and you wondered why you ever thought it was a good idea.

Oh, think I'm playing?

Ten minutes into the trip: "When I was your age, I had a full-time job and I'd already fought in two title fights."

Three hours in: "Oh, you're hungry again? Did you bring some stopping-for-snacks money?"

Six hours in: "Man, I shouldn't have ate those leftover beans for breakfast."

Eight hours in: "Can't believe I drove all this way to see a Strong boy fight so soft. That's your grandmother's side of the family. Ain't no Strong ever look like that in the ring. Why, I remember…"

Anyway, you get it.

By the time we crossed the Alabama state line, I was ready to claw my way into the trunk. I don't know how Nana could just sit there and hum and knit for most of a day, but that's what she

did. The Cadillac rumbled down a two-lane highway, kicking up trails of dust and exhaust, a dented rocket ship blasting through time in reverse from the future to a land that Wi-Fi forgot.

I'd put my earbuds in somewhere back in Kentucky, but the battery on my phone had long since run out. I just kept them in so no one would bother me. Nana kept knitting in the passenger seat, and Granddad tapped a finger on the steering wheel, humming along to a song only he could hear. Things seemed more or less calm, except for one thing:

Eddie's journal sat on the seat next to me.

Now, I could've sworn I'd stuffed the book under the clothes in my duffel bag. Which Grandad had put in the trunk. And yet here it was, waiting on me to do something I'd put off since the funeral. The late afternoon sun, occasionally peeking out from behind the storm clouds, made the journal look normal, ordinary. But every so often I'd shade the cover with my hands and peek at it while holding my breath. Yep, still glowing.

Why not open it, you might ask, *and see what's inside?*

Well, believe me, it wasn't that simple. Before Eddie's death, the cover of his brown leather journal had always been blank. Now a weird symbol appeared to be stitched into it, like a sun with rays that stretched out to infinity, or a flower with long petals. The same symbol was embossed on a carved wooden charm that dangled from a cord attached to the journal's spine. I'd seen the tassel before—Eddie had used it to mark his spot, or to flick me in the back of the head—but the charm was new.

And, even more weirdly, the trinket pulsed with green light, too. I'd been staring at that book every day for minutes on end, but the glow always stopped me from opening it.

I mean, I knew what was in there anyway. The stories Eddie had jotted down in his goofy, blocky handwriting, from his own silly creations to the fables Nana used to tell us when we were

younger, when she'd come up to visit. John Henry, Anansi the Spider, Brer Rabbit's adventures—I'd read them all. Our end-of-semester English project was supposed to be a giant collection of stories from our childhood. Eddie was doing the writing, and I was going to give the oral presentation. Then the accident happened. The counselor Mom took me to every Wednesday had said I should try to finish the writing part, even though school was now over for the year, as a part of healing and other stuff.

(Before you say something slick you might regret, Mr. Richardson is pretty cool for a counselor, you get me? We play *Madden* while we talk, which means I can focus on running up the score on his raggedy Eagles squad and not on being embarrassed about answering questions. It helps…some. If it gets too tough, he knows when to back off, too. So you can keep your *Sensitive* and *Man up* comments to yourself. Chumps.)

To avoid thinking about the haunted journal, I watched the weather outside the car window. The clouds had never let up, even once we were in the Deep South. They just switched from hurling lightning bolts at us to hurling fat drops of rain that splattered across the windshield like bugs. Everything everywhere was miserable, and that pretty much summed up my life at the moment.

I took off the earbuds and sighed. Nana heard and turned around in her seat to look at me.

"You hungry, sweetie?" she asked.

"No, not really."

"No*, ma'am*." Granddad's deep voice rolled back from the driver's seat. "You answer 'No, ma'am' to your grandmother, understand?"

"Yeah."

Granddad looked at me in the rearview mirror.

"I mean, yes, sir."

He held my eyes a moment longer, then went back to looking at the road.

"Well," Nana continued, turning around and picking up her knitting, "despite what your granddad said earlier"—she gave him a glare—"let me know when you are. Your mama told me you ain't been eating much, and we're gonna fix that. And don't you have some writing to do? That's what your counselor wants you to focus on."

"Boy don't need no counselor," Granddad rumbled. "He needs to work. Ain't no time for moping when horses need feeding and fences need mending."

"Walter!" Nana scolded. "He needs to—"

"I know what he needs—"

I shook my head and stopped paying attention. After spending a day in the car with them, I'd realized that this was what they did. They argued, they laughed, they sang, they argued again, and they knitted. Well, Nana knitted. But they were two sides of the same old coin.

With Granddad, everything was about work. Work, work, work.

Bored? Here's some work.

Finished working? Here's more work.

Need someone to talk to? Obviously, that meant you didn't work hard enough, so you know what? Have a little bit more work.

Nana, on the other hand, sang and hummed when she wasn't talking, which almost never happened, because she always had a new story to share. "Do you know why the owl can't sleep?" she'd say, and off the story would go, and you'd sit there and listen, just being polite at first, but by the end, you'd be on the edge of your seat.

I smiled. Eddie had loved listening to my grandmother. When she'd come to visit earlier this year, he'd practically followed her around, his journal in hand.

Speaking of which…

My left hand rested on top of it in the seat next to me, and I traced the symbol stitched into the front cover.

"What's that, sweetie?"

I looked up to see Nana peeking back over the seat.

"Hm? I mean, uh, yes…ma'am?"

Granddad nodded, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Nana smiled. "Is that for your writing?"

I hesitated. "Yes, ma'am." I held up the book so she could see it, and her eyes widened at the symbol on the cover.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked. Granddad turned to see what she was looking at, but Nana flapped a hand at him. "Watch the road, Walter."

"From Eddie…" I began, then paused. "I mean, his mom gave it to me. It is…was for us. For our school project. Why? What's wrong?"

Could she see it? Could she tell that the book was glowing, even in the daylight?

Nana pursed her lips. "That symbol. I just haven't seen it in a long time."

"You know what it is?"

"Well…" She glanced at Granddad, who'd tuned us out as soon as we started talking about writing. "It's the spider's web, an old African symbol for creativity and wisdom. It shows how tangled and complicated life can be. But with a little imaginative thinking, we can solve most of our problems and those of others."

"Do you notice anything else about the journal?" I asked her.

Nana laughed, a bright, joyous sound that infected anyone listening. “Is this a test?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I don’t see nothing but procrastination. Go ’head and give it a try.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I frowned. So Nana could see the symbol, this spiderweb, but not that it was glowing. Well, that didn’t make me feel any better.

Granddad smacked the steering wheel. “Y’all need to stop filling his head with that mess about symbols. He needs to stay in the real world, think about what he did wrong last night. The boy need to focus! Boxing ain’t gonna just happen—you got to train your body and your mind.”

“Granddad, I don’t want—”

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re not a kid anymore. You’re a Strong, and—”

“Walter,” Nana interrupted, “don’t be so hard on the boy.”

“He needs some toughening up—y’all being too soft on him!”

“Now look—” Nana started whisper-lecturing Granddad, who shook his head and grumbled beneath his breath.

I slid down in my seat and tried to block out the argument. I let my thumb trace the cover of the journal, and before my brain could tell me not to, I yanked it into my lap and flipped to a random page. So what if it glowed? It was still a book, and reading it would be better than listening to any more of Granddad’s insults disguised as life lessons. Or reliving that bus accident.

I mean, really, what could go wrong?

Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Race to the Sun* by Rebecca Roanhorse!

TAP TO BUY

ONE

I Can See Monsters

My name is Nizhoni Begay, and I can see monsters.

In fact, I'm looking at one right now.

The monster is a pale man with thin blond hair, slightly bulging eyes, and unusually red lips. He's tall and skinny, and he has on a black suit and tie. (Monsters wear human skin more often than fairy tales would lead you to think. Scales and horns and claws are strictly for beginners. Trust me, I'm an expert on these things.)

This monster is sitting in the second row of the packed bleachers of my seventh-grade coed basketball game, looking completely normal. Normal except for the fact that he's wearing a suit when everyone else is wearing a T-shirt that says GO, ISOTOPES! or GO, BEAVERS! depending on which team they're rooting for. Normal except there's a circle of empty space around him despite the gym being filled to capacity, like nobody wants to get close to him. Maybe they feel there's something creepy about him, too, but they aren't sure what it is.

I watch as a lady in a bright purple tracksuit moves in front of him, waving a red-and-black pom-pom dangerously near his face. Pretty sure if she keeps that up, she's a goner. Monsters don't take kindly to people invading their personal space.

Okay, I made that up. I don't actually know how monsters feel about personal space, or whether they eat ladies in purple tracksuits, and I'm not so much an expert as much as a reluctant amateur. I mean, I've only been able to sense monsters for a few months. It started as a strange feeling while watching a lady massaging the avocados at the farmers' market, and there was the definite bad vibe from the old dude with the scaly feet and

Jesus sandals at the Taco Bell. And just like in those instances, every instinct I have is shouting at me that this guy in the bleachers is *not* normal.

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise. A chill—like the time my little brother, Mac, dumped a snowball down my shirt—shudders down my spine. Out of habit, I touch the turquoise pendant I have taped to my chest underneath my shirt. I'm not supposed to wear it during basketball games, but knowing it's there helps me feel brave.

"Nizhoni!"

The way this school year has been going, trying to be brave has become almost a full-time thing. When I left my big public school and transferred to ICCS (short for Intertribal Community Charter School and pronounced *icks*), I really thought things would change for me. And by *change*, I mean I'd have lots of friends and be popular. After all, every student at ICCS is Native American, just like me. But I've been at ICCS for two years now and nothing is different. I'm still not popular, and I'm definitely not cool. I'm just—

"Nizhoni Begay!"

Coach! I whip my head around, because of course I'm not listening (Hello! Monster!), and she is right there in my face. So close, in fact, that drops of spittle fly out of her mouth and hit my cheek every time she shouts my name. I surreptitiously wipe off the spit, trying not to look completely grossed out, even though it's pretty gross.

Coach is no monster, but she has issues with personal space, too—she's always in mine. She's also a little short for basketball—but no one would ever tell her that, because she makes up for being height-challenged by being really loud. Coach is Hopi, so it's not her fault she's so short. Besides, she's scary in other ways. I'm not worried she will eat my eyeballs for hors d'oeuvres or anything. (Eyeball hors d'oeuvres are very popular with monsters. I read that somewhere, FYI.)

Coach snaps her fingers inches from my nose. "Are you even listening?"

I nod. Total lie. Besides, it's time-out. Nobody listens during time-out.

"There's five seconds left in the game!" she yells. "Your focus should be on me"—she points at herself with two fingers—"and your teammates." She gestures at the group of seventh-grade boys and girls now huddling around me. "We need you to pay attention."

"Sure thing, Coach," I chirp obediently, but honestly, all I can think about now are eyeballs stacked like meatballs on a toothpick for easy snacking.

Coach is talking again. "Okay. Davery is going to pass the ball in. Who wants to take the last shot?"

"I'll do it!" I say, raising my hand.

The rest of my team groans in disbelief.

"Put your hand down, Nizhoni," Coach snaps. "You're standing right beside me."

"Oh, right." I lower it. "But I can take the last shot."

Coach looks at me. The whole team looks at me. I stand a little straighter to seem extra tall. I, in fact, am not height-challenged. I have a good inch and a half on Coach.

"I'll take the last shot," I repeat. Firmly.

"Are you sure, Nizhoni?" Davery whispers. He's my best friend—okay, my *only* friend—and always has my back, but right now he looks a little worried. His brown eyes are narrowed in concern behind his glasses and his lips press together thoughtfully. He runs a nervous hand over his short-cropped curly hair.

"Easy as pie," I insist. "You pass the ball to me. I'll be at the top of the key, and—*swish!*—Isotopes win!" I bust out my most confident smile.

Davery just crinkles his brow.

"Does anyone *else* want to take the last shot?" Coach asks, looking pointedly at the rest of the team. Everyone looks down or away or anywhere else but at Coach, because no one wants that kind of pressure. "Anyone?" she asks again, desperate.

I clear my throat loudly.

"Okay," Coach says, resigned. "Davery passes the ball to Nizhoni. Nizhoni, you take the shot. Be ready!"

Movement in the bleachers catches my eye. It's the monster.

I watch as he makes his way past the other spectators. He's pushy, knocking into people's knees without even saying *Excuse me*. Rude! But then, monsters aren't known for their good manners. Some folks give him a dirty look as he shoves his way through, but most just move aside, rub their arms like they're cold, and mutter unhappily to the person next to them.

I lose sight of him as the crowd rises to their feet.

I twist my neck this way and that, straining to see where he disappeared to in the midst of screaming fans, but he's gone. Lost in a sea of black and red.

Coach claps just as the buzzer sounds, signaling the end of time-out.

Everyone on the team extends an arm into the middle of the circle, touches hands, and yells, "Isotopes!": a rallying cry for what must be the worst mascot in the history of mascots—expect maybe for this one team I heard of called the Fighting Pickles. But really, who even knows what an isotope is? Davery once tried to explain it to me—something to do with the history of nuclear technology and atomic bombs in New Mexico, blah, blah—but I fell asleep halfway through.

Coach is yelling. We hurry to take our spots. Davery is at midcourt with the ball in his hands. I run to the top of the key and get ready for the inbound pass.

I try to visualize the winning shot I'm about to make, like Coach tells us to. I can see it all—the crowd chanting my name, my teammates hoisting me on their shoulders and leading me around the gym in victory, just like a champion in a sports movie. Everyone will know me. I'll be a superstar! Fame! Glory!

I take another quick peek at the crowd, double-checking for the monster in the suit. Nothing, nothing…No, wait…

There he is! Bottom row, courtside, twenty feet away. His eyes are red and he's staring right at me!

Four things happen all at once.

1. I scream.
2. The ref blows the whistle.
3. Davery shouts my name.
4. And I turn toward him just in time for the basketball to hit me—*smack!*—right between the eyes.

RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

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